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INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE
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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 0165
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO 4669
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DEPT PLS PASS TO USAID FOR LAC/CAM - K. SIENKIEWICZ

E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: CODEL REID'S VISIT TO GUATEMALA

Meeting with President Berger

¶1. (SBU) Majority Leader Senator Harry Reid led a bipartisan delegation of six senators to Guatemala Nov. 30 - Dec. 2. Reid opened the CODEL's November 30 meeting with President Berger by saying that the USG should give greater attention to social issues in Latin America, noting Guatemala's problems with corruption and narcotrafficking. He stated that the U.S. shared responsibility for the drug problem. Senator Conrad asked whether the GOG is concerned that increased USG counternarcotics assistance to Mexico might have the effect of encouraging traffickers to move their operations to Central America. President Berger and Vice President Stein responded that they are working in close collaboration with their Central American counterparts, as well as those in Mexico and Colombia, to ensure a coordinated regional response. They said that they welcomed the President's Merida Initiative. However, they found the proposed amount of \$50 million inadequate to the challenge at hand, but were encouraged by indications that USG counternarcotics assistance might grow. Senator Reid responded to President Berger's call to halt deportations of Guatemalans from the U.S. by stressing the importance of U.S. immigration reform, to include an expanded guest worker program.

¶2. (SBU) President Berger highlighted the accomplishments of his outgoing administration, including economic growth, poverty reduction, government transition planning, and securing congressional approval of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). Berger asked that the senators reconsider the long-standing congressional ban on USG military assistance to the Guatemalan Army, saying that it was an anachronism. Senator Reid responded that the Senate is currently considering language that would provide some relief. Berger accused Venezuelan President Chavez of trying to use oil to influence events in Guatemala. In response to Senator Menendez's inquiry about what the USG could do to help Guatemala reduce poverty, Berger discussed the importance of remittances, GOG rural development programs, and efforts to include women and indigenous persons in national decision-making. VP Stein highlighted the role of cooperatives in helping indigenous farmers to take full advantage of CAFTA.

VP-Elect Seeks Close Bilateral Relationship

¶3. (SBU) In a subsequent meeting with Vice President-Elect Rafael Espada and UNE Congressman-Elect Roberto Alejos, Espada told CODEL Reid that the incoming Colom Government's top priorities would be poverty alleviation, improving access to health care and education for the rural population, and improving indigenous people's access to economic opportunities. He described Guatemalan society as violent and rent by socio-economic divisions. Broken homes led many of the country's youths to seek surrogate families in gangs. Espada said he looked forward to close collaboration with the USG and with other Central American governments, including on counternarcotics efforts. (Bio Note: Espada said that it had been the Alliance for Progress youth exchange program of Qhad been the Alliance for Progress youth exchange program of the 1960's that had taken him to Washington, where he worked as an intern in the office of Senator Robert Kennedy. The experience had sparked his interest in public service, and had also led to a life-long relationship with the Kennedy Family, several members of which would attend his January inauguration, he said.)

¶4. (U) CODEL Reid visited USAID-supported "Cuatro Pinos" agricultural cooperative December 1, in which approximately 1200 mostly indigenous farmers have united to take advantage of economies of scale in exporting their products to the U.S. Senators Reid and Menendez also met with former gang members participating in a USAID-sponsored rehabilitation and employment program. The former gang members, some of whom had been in prison in the U.S. and were then deported, said they had found new hope in religion and in the private-sector jobs they got with USAID assistance. At the Peace Corps training site, Senators Reid and Menendez met with approximately 20 Peace Corps Volunteers working in Guatemala in a variety of fields. Senator Reid praised the volunteers for enduring sacrifices in the cause of public service.

¶5. (U) CODEL Reid cleared this message prior to transmission.
Lindwall